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Alliluyeva, Svetlana

HOME THOUGHTS FROM ABROAD

Only One Year

By Svetlana Alliluyeva. Translated by Paul Chavchavadze.

Hutchinson, 415 pages, 35s.

Somewhere in her book, Miss Alliluyeva lists the names and careers of sons and daughters of a dozen or so top Soviet leaders of the Stalin era in order to bring out a most telling fact : with only one exception, none of those "Kremlin children" chose to follow in the political footsteps of their fathers. The exception was Jacob Sverdlov's son, Andrey, who became a professional policeman. Others, bearers of famous names like Molotov, Voroshilov, Kaganovich, Zhdanov, Mikoyan, Shvernik, preferred to earn their living as architects, engineers, aircraft designers, chemists. Miss Alliluyeva herself studied history and literature and wanted to have nothing to do with politics during her father's lifetime or afterwards.

It is not hard to understand the causes of this revulsion. Miss Alliluyeva's account of her own father in this book is even more convincing than the one in her "Twenty Letters to a Friend," written secretly whilst she was still living in Russia and published shortly after her "defection" to the west in 1967. There is, first of all, Stalin in the late 1940s moodily listening to "Boris Godunov," obsessed with the danger of "zionist" plots and ordering, in his daughter's hearing, that the murder of a well-known Jewish theatre director, Michoels, should be described as a "car accident." There is also Stalin the coarse and ill-educated man, pronouncing anathemas on eminent scholars like the linguist Professor Marr, or upholding pushful ignoramuses like the biologist Lysenko. But there is also Stalin the domestic tyrant with a completely Asiatic view of marriage and family, insisting on complete submissiveness from the women of the house, driving his second wife, Miss Alliluyeva's mother, to suicide, and very nearly ruining his own daughter's life. There is, finally, Stalin the focal point of the Soviet ruling circle, dining every night with his dreary Politburo chums, playing practical jokes with them, telling crude stories and letting them drink themselves into a stupor so that they had to be carried away sick or unconscious by their bodyguards.

Not since Mr Djilas's "Conversations with Stalin" have we had such a close-up picture of Stalin's lieutenants at their grossest and worst. And Miss Alliluyeva is inevitably even more authoritative—and deadly—than Mr Djilas. From her we get a terrifying picture of the dreary life of the Soviet "grandee" families moving into dead or disgraced men's *dachas* only to find themselves expelled from them upon their own fall from grace. She has some kind words for Malenkov, now living in complete obscurity but still hounded by his ex-colleagues. And she draws a fairly mild picture of her former father-in-law, Zhdanov, the terror of artists and writers in the 1940s. She is even deadlier than Djilas on Beria, the police chief who abducted a young Georgian girl, Nina, who had come to plead for her brother. But Nina, strangely, became a loyal wife to him and bore him a son, like his mother a gentle, well-mannered and clever boy who eventually became one of Russia's leading rocket engineers.

Vulgarity, boredom and, underlying it all, fear: this was how the author saw life at the top of Soviet society. Her father ruined her first marriage to a Jew, and his successors tried very hard to prevent her from marrying a gentle, elderly Indian communist, Brajesh Singh, whom she met in hospital. "What do you want with this sick old Hindu ?" Mr Kosygin asked her and absolutely refused to allow the registration of the marriage. And when her husband died, it took a long time to get permission to take his ashes to India. There, too, she felt the heavy hand of Soviet officialdom putting pressure on her at every stage. But there at last she had an opportunity to answer back. Her answer, after a few weeks with her late husband's family in India, was to refuse to return to Russia. The parts of the book in which she describes how she arrived at her decision are among the most moving in the whole book. But she remains a shrewd, detached and non-sentimental observer, missing none of the ironies of her own and other people's situations.

The book, which is formally a record of her first dramatic year abroad, holds much else that is enjoyable and moving, not least her descriptions of life in India and the United States. But inevitably one returns to the pages dealing with her life in Russia. This book deserves to be widely read and will be enjoyed by all those who read it, both as a story of personal courage and endurance and as an important document about Russia today from the pen of one of the most important and attractive "defectors" ever to come from there.

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